



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

## **NMFS Decides Not to Issue Exempted Fishing Permits For Atlantic Billfish Tournaments to Evaluate J-Hook and Heavy Tackle Effects on Atlantic Marlin**

NMFS has decided not to proceed with issuing exempted fishing permits (EFP) to collect data during Atlantic billfish tournaments to evaluate the impacts of J-hooks and heavy tackle on Atlantic marlin. In response to continuing public comment received related to the impacts of the rule to require circle hook use by highly migratory species (HMS) permitted vessels in Atlantic billfish tournaments, NMFS will consider potential strategies and mechanisms to mitigate the impacts of specific hook requirements on Atlantic billfish tournaments and tournament participants in future rulemaking.

The rule requiring circle hook use by HMS permitted vessels in Atlantic billfish tournaments was part of the Final Consolidated HMS Fishery Management Plan (October 2, 2006; 71 FR 58058) and became effective January 1, 2007. NMFS has continued to receive public comment on this rule and considered various mechanisms to address constituent's concerns which included development of an EFP program to evaluate J-hook and heavy tackle effects on Atlantic marlin.

NMFS issued a Notice of Intent to issue EFPs (November 27, 2006, 71 FR 68558) and received several public comments and applications from five Atlantic billfish tournament operators on behalf of 15 tournaments requesting exemptions from requirements for anglers fishing from HMS permitted vessels and participating in Atlantic billfish tournaments. The requests were received for tournaments that would operate in the U.S. Southeast Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.

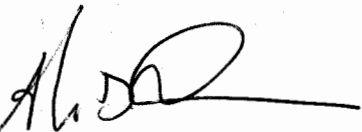
NMFS also considered public comment received on the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Final Consolidated HMS Fishery Management Plan (Oct 2, 2006; 71 FR 58058) and comment received during the October 3-4, 2006 HMS Advisory Panel meeting (August 30, 2006; 71 FR 51577). Comments received expressed concern over the difficulty of standardizing fishing gear type and use in a tournament setting. Comments also expressed concern over the quality of data collected in a tournament setting and the data's scientific applicability given the fishing characteristics of tournaments (fast paced activity, focus on catching and retaining specific species and/or size classes, and varying tournament rules). Finally, comments were received that expressed a general lack of support for conducting research and/or data collection in tournaments.

NMFS worked with billfish tournament constituents to address the concerns over study design and data collection; however, NMFS has determined that collection of data to evaluate the impacts of J-hooks and heavy tackle on Atlantic marlin during billfish tournaments in the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico would be problematic because of the varying conditions and methodologies discussed above that would likely occur within and between tournaments.

NMFS recognizes the conservation benefits of circle hook use in the billfish fishery and strongly encourages anglers and tournament participants to work with NMFS and HMS in the future to address the use of circle hooks to reduce post-release hooking mortality.



For more information on billfish tournaments and circle hooks, please see the HMS Management Division website at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms> or call Russ Dunn or Randy Blankinship at 727-824-5313.



Alan Risenhoover  
Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries

JAN 29 2007

Date

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